



NOTES FROM THE:

Professional Military Comptroller School

by Major Dianne Armon

I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them [sic] think. (Socrates) That is the essence of the DoD Professional Military Comptroller School (PMCS) executive communication program. The program places great emphasis on effective oral and written communication. Recent articles in the *Journal for Education for Business*, the *Internal Auditor*, and the *Business Journal* have shown that the ability to effectively communicate, orally and in writing, is just as important as technical and leadership skills, and has a definite impact on success.

The PMCS executive communication program emphasizes critical thinking and the ability to present an argument logically. It provides an opportunity to conduct research on current economic and resource management issues, practice organizing and compiling data into useable information, and evaluate personal written and oral communication skills in a non-threatening environment. Students receive added guidance through peer and faculty feedback, as well as guest lectures.

Each student must successfully complete two research papers following a prescribed format. The first is a short paper (2 pages) on an economic topic (from a list provided). The second is a long paper (6-8 pages) on any resource management topic (students choose, with faculty approval). The program advocates a plain style of writing versus the typical bureaucratic style normally found in government correspondence. *Business Horizons* published the results of a study that examined the high cost of the typical government bureaucratic style versus a plain style of writing. Two hundred fifty-five Naval officers read two memos with the same context: one used the bureaucratic style, while the other used the plain style. It took the officers longer to read the bureaucratic style, and they often had to reread the memo to understand it. The study concluded that the plain style is more cost effective due to the opportunity costs of having the officers spend more time reading and rereading the bureaucratic style, when they could be better employed acting upon the memo or fulfilling other duties.

This same style is employed in the speaking program, where students have ample opportunity to practice their oral communications skills. Each student introduces at least one guest lecturer, and leads a

seminar-guided discussion using a preplanned lesson. The core of the speaking program consists of the 8-minute presentations. Each student presents two presentations on any resource management topic, and usually speaks on subjects related to their jobs. Additionally, students view their presentations on videotape to maximize feedback. Students have the added opportunity of participating in an optional oral presentation lab, affectionately called the *speakeasy club*.

The guest speakers for the executive communication program are outstanding. Dr Abigail Gray-Briggs presents a two-hour lecture on effective writing. She is the Chairman of the Department of Research at the Air Command and Staff College at Air University (AU). She breaks down the writing process into simple, easy-to-understand steps, and shows how to go from the blank page or computer screen to the final draft. Her hints help in narrowing a general topic to a question worth asking and a problem worth solving to develop a workable thesis.

Dr John Kline, the AU Provost, talks on the subject of effective speaking and listening. He is the author of two books on speaking and listening (provided in the course material). The information he gives helps improve the ability to give and receive verbal information, both on and off the job.

Ms Sharon Wallace, the Instructional Systems Design Advisor for Air Force Officer Accessions and Training Schools, speaks on the subject of guided discussions. Her lecture aids in understanding how to work together as a team and conduct effective meetings, especially when buy-in is needed.

That, in a nutshell, is the PMCS executive communication program. Two research papers, two speeches, and seminar leadership, along with other venues for practicing oral and written communications, give the students an excellent opportunity to improve their skill. Any improvement will pay big dividends, whether on or off the job. Effective communication skills are valuable tools in all aspects of life. In the words of Alvin Toffler, The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn. Similarly, if students are open to this concept of learning, unlearning, and relearning, they will find that their six weeks at PMCS will be time well spent.